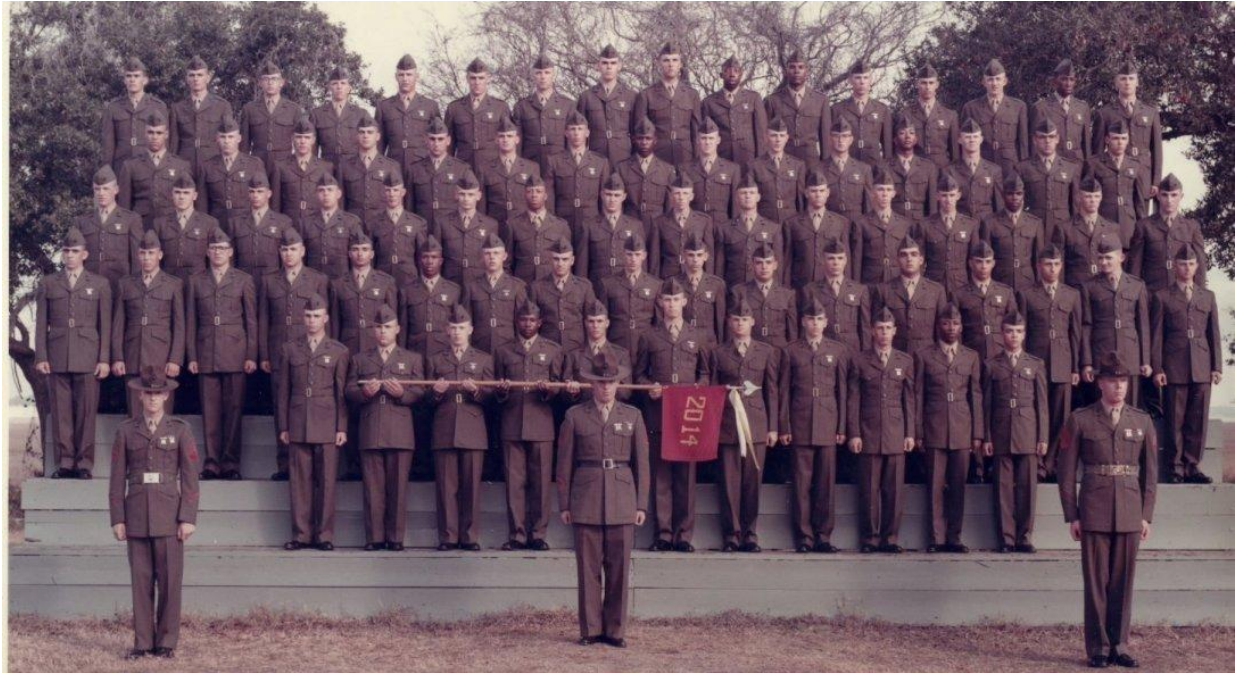


This is the story of an All American Hero

## Sergeant Robert French Starbuck



A Montgomery, New York tribute to a fine young American man, Robert Starbuck. He became a drill instructor (DI) at the United States Marine Corps Recruit Training Facility at Parris Island, South Carolina and he is shown lower, right in the 1966 Marine Corps photo.

In Vietnam, Sergeant Starbuck gave his life while working to save members of the night reconnaissance patrol he commanded, while under very heavy enemy small arms and grenade fire.

## Robert Starbuck - High School Life

This story begins in Starbuck's hometown of Montgomery, which is a small, rural community located in New York's Hudson Valley. Everyone knew each other and the class sizes were small so friends were quite close. Many students shared their classrooms with friends from kindergarten right through high school.

Bob Starbuck was an ideal young American man. At age sixteen, Bob Starbuck (or Bobby as he was known) raised a Guernsey cow that won first prize at the Orange County, NY Fair and he went on to the NY State Fair at Syracuse with that blue ribbon cow. The Starbuck home featured a large pond where every area kid was able



Robert Starbuck. shown front row. third from left.

to swim, complete with the leaches that swimmers of the time tolerated. Bob Starbuck attended the original Montgomery High School, which in his last year of school, became centralized with nearby Walden and Maybrook to become the Valley Central School District.

Bob was a great athlete, competing in baseball, basketball, soccer, and track. Walt



Starbuck. shown front row. fourth from left

Karsten lived near Bob Starbuck and he helped Bob practice his pitching, which were really 100 mph hardballs. Walt reported that each pitch was a stinger even with a good catcher's mitt.

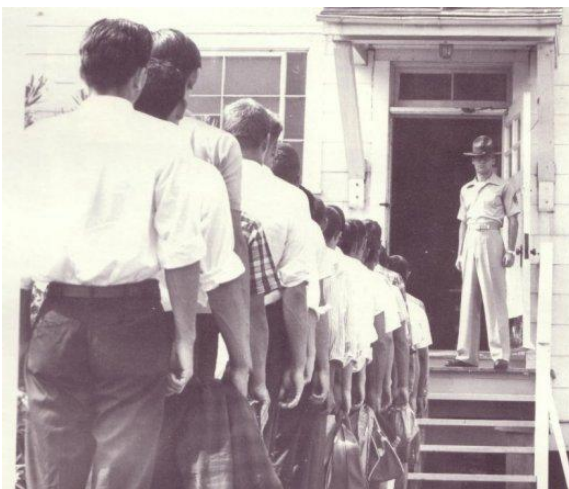
Bob Starbuck was a powerful man, who never abused his size advantage. Bob graduated from Valley Central High School in 1960, attended Orange County Community College and, in 1961; he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps.

### Robert Starbuck – Military Career, Parris Island, S. C.

At graduation from boot camp at the Marine training facility at Parris Island, Bob Starbuck was selected as the most outstanding recruit in his platoon. Starbuck requested sea duty and he was assigned to the guided missile, light cruiser Little Rock on a voyage to Cuba and the Mediterranean. About a year later, Bob was assigned as a drill instructor (DI) at Parris Island.



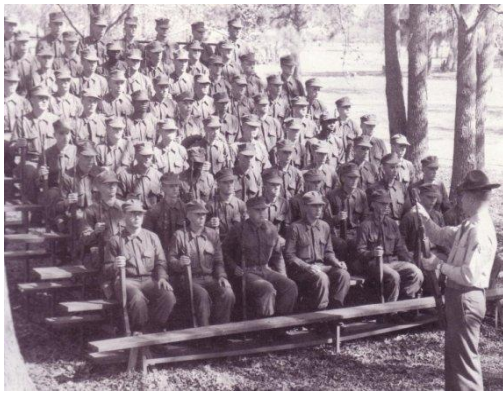
Parris Island has had a long history of service to our country, including acting as a training facility during World War I and II and it currently acts as the main Marine Corps Recruit Training Regiment. Here, men and women become not just soldiers, they become Marines.



Upon arrival at Parris Island, recruits are lined up to meet their drill instructors and receive basic support, like medical exams, uniforms and equipment, including rifles. It is important that each recruit has respect for his or her drill instructor, where a certain amount of fear proves useful also. In 2005, in the book entitled *Masters of the Art*, Marine Ronald E. Winter wrote about his first day at boot camp and meeting his DI, Robert Starbuck, for the first time.

*“My first impression of Sgt. Robert Starbuck was a worm’s eye view of the soles of his boots. They came crashing through the double swinging doors in the middle of the Parris Island Recruit Receiving Barracks at about 3am on January 14, 1966. Starbuck was six feet tall and about 185 pounds. He had legs like tree trunks and a perfectly V-shaped upper body, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. Starbuck looked like what I expected a U.S. Marine drill instructor to look like. There was a rumbling noise, like thunder, or maybe a herd of buffalo on a rampage, and Starbuck kicked through the door, both feet off the floor. He saw us sitting there and his face turned to a twisted, red picture of pure anger.... I thought that, except for the physical training, the worst was already behind me. I thought that the DIs would come out, shake our hands, welcome us to Parris Island and be happy we were there.....God, was I that stupid?? That was when Starbuck came blasting through those doors and I asked myself a simple question. How the hell did you get yourself into this?”* Ronald Winter went on to become a true fighting Marine and his book serves to provide a wonderful insight into Marine Corps activity in Vietnam.

In short order, the officers, non-commissioned officers and recruits of Parris Island gained respect for Corporal Starbuck. The Parris Island commanding general wrote a letter to Bob Starbuck’s parents to note that Robert was an inspiration to both enlisted men and officers, and that he was meticulous in performance of his duty. He won a number of medals for excellence in marksmanship and other military activities. Bob was well known back home for his ability with a rifle. A drill instructor must teach many aspects of military



life, like military law and courtesy, first aid, hygienics, close order drill, spit and polish, combat swimming, weapons proficiency and tactics. Intense personal and barracks inspections are conducted daily. Each recruit is tested vigorously before he/she can graduate from boot camp.

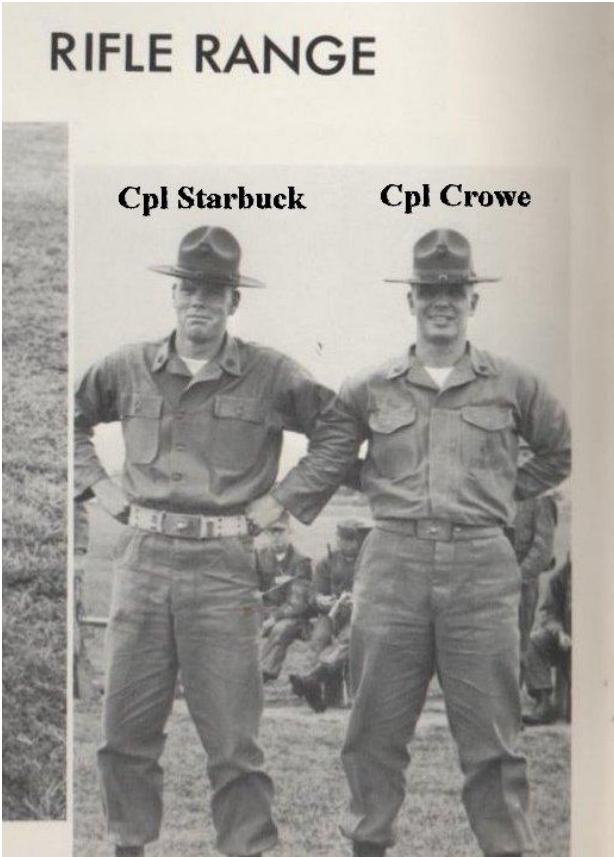
Physical training is an important part of becoming a Marine. If a recruit is not in shape upon entering the Corps, he/she is certainly in shape upon boot camp graduation. Intense physical training is the norm at Parris Island. Exercises with hand-to-hand combat, obstacle courses, pugil sticks and bayonets provide recruits



with the skills the need to act as infantrymen, which all Marines are regardless of their eventual duty assignment in the Corps.

Over the years, several Marines have had the opportunity to register comments about their admiration and respect for Robert Starbuck.

*“I survived recruit training because of Corporal Starbuck. He led by example and he was the epitome of the Marine Corps. I ran into him in Vietnam just before he gave his last full measure of devotion to the country he loved. He is on top of my hero list. If you knew Sergeant Starbuck, you had the high privilege of knowing one of the finest men on earth.”* Richard Harrison – 06 February 2007 – Note: Richard Harrison has supplied Marine information about Bob and he is anxious to receive this essay.



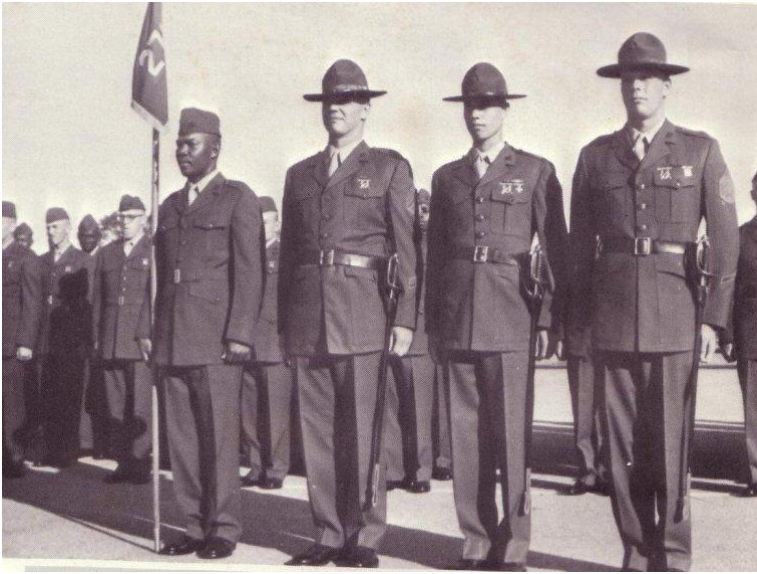
*“Sergeant Starbuck was a tough professional who taught me to be tough, professional, fair and loyal. Thirty-five years later, I'm still talking about him. His example has taken me through hard times in my life, then and later. I'm proud to say I was one of his recruits. God bless him and the others. Semper Fidelis.”*

That statement about Bob Starbuck was written on the online Virtual Wall website in November of 2001 by John Fahey of Orangeburg, NY. John also provided the photo, shown above of Bob Starbuck on the firing range.

Once basic training is complete and each recruit thoroughly tested, a graduation ceremony is held for each recruit battalion. This is when men officially become members of the Marine Corps. This is a proud moment for all recruits and each receives a graduation book, similar to a high school



graduation book. Each Marine is intensely proud to have completed boot camp and the graduation event is marked by the formal parades of all recruit platoons.



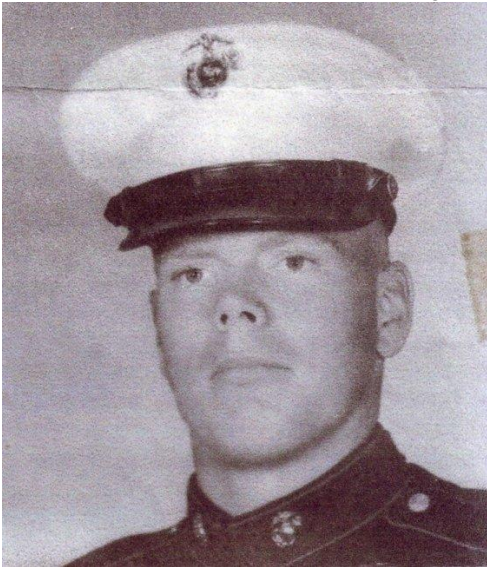
In 1964, Bob returned to Montgomery for a visit for the last time. He stayed for a few days with Russ Gillespie. At this time, Bob's upper body was a nearly perfect triangle, broad at the shoulder and narrow at the hip.

At Parris Island, Bob worked to shape the bodies and minds of his recruits and to make them proud marines. Bob Starbuck is shown here at a 1966 graduation ceremony, standing to the

right side.

## Robert Starbuck – Military Career, Republic of Vietnam

Sergeant Robert Starbuck felt that he needed to volunteer for combat duty in order to fulfill his responsibility as a Marine and drill instructor. He requested combat duty. The rest of the story is simply told and all too brief. Starbuck's first Purple Heart was awarded for injuries he received while leading a rifle platoon through the

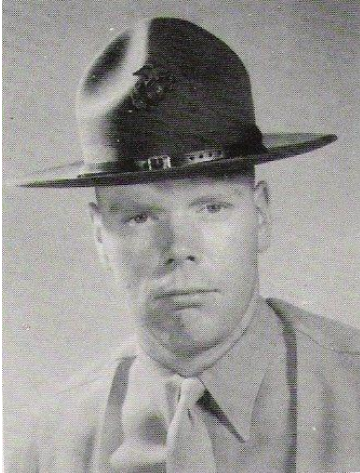


impossible terrain most Americans see only on television. Pieces of shrapnel cut through both knees. Bob was hospitalized only two weeks and he wrote home about his injury only after he returned to action.

In January of 1967, Sergeant Robert Starbuck was proud as he helped to guard the election of Vietnamese President Ky, which saw over 85% of the Vietnamese people going to the polls. This is still a voting record for a democracy and only the second time in recorded history that a presidential election, in a democracy, was held during wartime. The first time was in 1864 as President

Abraham Lincoln was reelected here in the United States. This was only a couple of weeks before he would give that last measure of devotion to his country. On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1967, Bob commanded a night recon patrol that was attacked by a large enemy force. Four members of his patrol, including Bob, were killed in action and several were wounded. His fellow Marines had very kind words to say about him.

Excerpt from the book, Honor the Warrior, the U.S. Marines in Vietnam by William Myers 2000, Redoubt Press – *“The patrol leader was Sgt. Robert Starbuck. I had*



*been on several recon patrols with him before and he definitely knew what he was doing – he was an excellent Marine and patrol leader- squared away-a professional-I have nothing but respect for that man-he was tops with me.”*

Note: In this excerpt, William Myers was writing about the night patrol, in graphic detail, that took the life of Robert Starbuck. Myers was severely wounded that night.

Sergeant Robert F. Starbuck is shown to the left.

In 1968 Bob Starbuck’s parents were at Parris Island to receive the DI bronze hat



plaque and Bob’s Silver Star (shown on the next page). The citation read: *The President of the United States takes pride in presenting the Silver Star Medal (Posthumously) to Robert French Starbuck, Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry in action while serving with Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division, in*

*connection with combat operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam on February 3, 1967. By his courage, aggressive fighting spirit and steadfast devotion to duty in the face of extreme personal danger, Sergeant Starbuck upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country. Home Town: Montgomery, New York.*

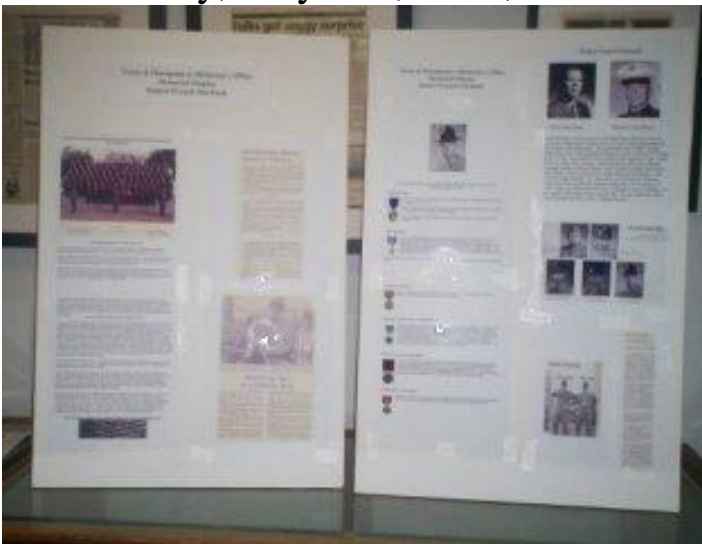
In the photo on the previous page, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Starbuck receive a bronze drill instructor's hat and plaque from Marine Colonel C.G. Koontz.



The newly named boot, named after Robert Starbuck, stands in the foreground. The Robert Starbuck Silver Boot Award is still awarded to the best performing Marine recruit training platoon in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at boot camp in Paris Island. Starbuck's mother said: *"Robert probably would have been embarrassed by the whole affair"* which serves to note how unassuming Robert Starbuck really was.

*"Friend, rest in peace, you are not forgotten. I was on night patrol with Sgt. Starbuck on the night of his death. He was a great leader and more than a patrol leader. He is still a real Marine."* Comment by David 'Frenchy' Verheyn, Gulf Breeze, Fl February 2000. Note: In 1967, Vice President Hubert Humphrey presented Sergeant Verheyn with the Navy Cross for his own heroism on the night that Bob Starbuck died.

On Saturday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, a memorial ceremony was held in Bob Starbuck's hometown of Montgomery, New York. At the Montgomery Village Museum, a memorial plaque for Bob Starbuck was unveiled and a visual display (shown to the left) showing his high school and military exploits was presented to a full house of local residents. Village of Montgomery Historian, Marion Wild, opened and closed the ceremony, which featured several statements, by fellow Marines of Bob Starbuck that are contained in this essay. A VFW color guard fired a 21-gun salute to Sergeant Robert Starbuck and everyone sang God Bless America. After the ceremony, several local residents offered their own observations about Bob Starbuck and his impact on their own lives. The Montgomery, NY community has plans to further memorialize the memory of this fine young American man.



## Another Marine Comment

*“I find all this history (Bob Starbuck’s story) very interesting on it's own, even if I had I not known Robert Starbuck but my having known him and having great respect for him just adds that much more to my interest. I really appreciate you sharing it all with me. Wish I could be there for the memorial service. I will take time that day to reflect on what you all are doing. If you ever get to Savannah, Georgia be sure to look me up.”* Tommy Taylor – 14 May 2009. Note: Tommy Taylor provided the photo and is shown holding the guidon in the Marine platoon picture shown in the display.

On behalf of a grateful community, Montgomery, NY, we extend our heartfelt thanks for having known Robert (Bobby) Starbuck and we recognize his significant skills and dedication on behalf of a grateful nation and, especially, our proud United States Marine Corps. May he rest in peace!

*“Sgt. Robert F. Starbuck believed in his country enough to die for it. He knew that its institutions are intrinsically good, the best ever on earth.”*

## **Some Starbuck Family History:**

Robert Starbuck’s family has had a long time association with the sea. His father, Sidney, is of early New England ancestry of those who settled Nantucket Island and he left Columbia University during World War I to see adventure at sea. During World War II, he worked for the British Ministry of War Transport. His duties involved arranging transport of munitions, cargoes, and troops to Europe. The family made its mark in maritime history, and produced some of the most noted whaling shipowners and skippers. The author of Moby Dick picked the name ‘Starbuck’ as his first mate’s name because of its salty background. Through his mother, Bob Starbuck was a direct descendent of Elder William Brewster and John Alden of Mayflower fame.

## Suggested Reading

Masters of the Art, a book by Ronald E. Winter 2005, published by Random House A Fighting Marine’s Memoir of Vietnam. This is a compelling story and is highly recommended. Ronald Winter had Bob Starbuck as his DI at Parris Island and the book contains many positive references to Bob.

Honor the Warrior, the U.S. Marines in Vietnam by William Myers 2000, Redoubt Press. This is a well-written account of Marine Corps activity in Vietnam. It also contains a chilling account of Myers' own experience on the fateful night that Robert Starbuck died.

<http://www.amazon.com/Honor-Warrior-William-L-Myers/dp/0967436508>

## **Casualty Report – The Night that Sergeant Robert Starbuck Died.**

As noted by William Myers in his book, Honor the Warrior, the Marines with the Starbuck night recon patrol, in addition to himself, were:

### Killed in Action

Armitage, Robert L. Pfc, Everett, Washington

Shafer, Robert L. Cpl., Windsor, Illinois

Smith, Edward F., Pfc, Easton, Massachusetts

Starbuck, Robert F., Sgt, Montgomery, New York

The other patrol members were Raymond L. Chaplin, Charles H. Davis, James R. O'Leary, James H. Rowe, Roger S. Smith, Klaus H. Urbaniak, and David A Verheyn.

Note: David Verheyn was awarded the Navy Cross by Vice President Hubert Humphrey for his own heroism that night.

## **Related Web Sites, Sergeant Robert Starbuck**

Virtual Wall Page for Robert Starbuck

<http://www.virtualwall.org/ds/StarbuckRF01a.htm>

Online page for Sergeant Robert Starbuck at the Vietnam Veterans Wall.

<http://thewall-usa.com/guest.asp?recid=49486>

MyArmedForces.Com Page for Robert Starbuck

[http://vietnam-wall.myarmedforces.com/profile/50092/Robert Starbuck](http://vietnam-wall.myarmedforces.com/profile/50092/Robert_Starbuck)

<http://www.1streconbnassociation.org/Fall06NL/Starbuck.htm>

1<sup>st</sup> Recon Bn. Association article by James Rowe – a chilling eyewitness account of the action the night of February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1967.

VetFriends.com Page for Robert Starbuck

[https://www.vetfriends.com/memorial/honoree.cfm?hindex=47010&user\\_ID=](https://www.vetfriends.com/memorial/honoree.cfm?hindex=47010&user_ID=)



## **Special Thanks !!**

Special thanks is extended to Village of Montgomery Historian, Marion Wild, and Town Historian, Suzanne Isaksen, for their great assistance in contributing toward the effort to memorialize Robert Starbuck.

Special thanks is also extended to the Marine Corps comrades of Robert Starbuck who have contributed to the publication of this essay. Many of these Marines had Starbuck as their drill instructor during Marine boot camp and they remember him fondly. These include:

- John Fahey of Orangeburg, New York. Quotes from John and pictures from his Marine boot camp grad book are included in this essay.
- Myron Gittell of Kiamiesha Lake, New York. Myron's grad book pictures are also included in this essay.

Note: John and Myron both attended the May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009 memorial ceremony at the Montgomery, NY Village Museum for Robert Starbuck.

Additional Thanks!! – Extended to members of the U.S. Marine Corps who contributed quotes and/or pictures for the memorial. These include Tommy Taylor (Savanna, GA), Richard Harrison and other Marines who contributed comments to one or more of the online Vietnam memorial web sites as noted in this essay.

Written by veteran friends of Bob Starbuck from Montgomery, New York:  
Walt Karsten, Russell Gillespie, James Sweikata and Joseph Devine  
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